Rapid Response Published BMJ

Re: Ghosts in the machine

Thu, 2011-12-08 03:30

So don't let ghosts in the machine…

"However, it is not necessarily the integrity of the medical writers
that is the cause for concern."

Rachel Hendrick makes several important points, but the point she makes about the integrity of medical writers is a key one…and rather refreshing! If we don't want ghosts in the machine, don't let them in. If we really care about integrity in the literature (and we're willing to face the reality that many authors have limited time or writing expertise), then we need to encourage the use of professional medical writers.

Please note that professional medical writers:
- Are rarely involved in publications retracted for misconduct (1);
- Acknowledge their presence and funding source and, importantly, know that authors must control the content and data included in the manuscript (2);
- Will encourage their authors to submit a completed "ethical use of a medical writer" checklist (whether requested by the journal or not) (3). This checklist, freely available from PLoS Medicine, has teeth. Authors must declare that they (and their writer) have followed ethical publication practices and have documented evidence to prove it. Editors who want to keep ghosts out of the machine should make submission of this PLoS Medicine checklist compulsory for any author using writing assistance.